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Guest editorial

RAI's First Annual Postgraduate Conference, September 20, 2011, Department of Anthropology, Durham University

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<http://www.dur.ac.uk/anthropologyjournal/vol18/iss2/mughal2012.pdf>

Durham University hosted the Royal Anthropological Institute's First Annual Postgraduate Conference, held on September 20, 2011. The conference not only provided an opportunity for the postgraduate students at various universities across the UK to present their papers but also to know what RAI has to offer them in order to enhance the quality and exposure of their researches (Handley et al. 2012). Since this was the first conference by the RAI at postgraduate level appealing all sub-disciplines of anthropology, no particular theme was proposed. For this reason, the conference happened to be a 'collage' of a variety of themes and issues in which British anthropology is contemporarily engaged in at home and overseas. When I shared the idea of publishing the conference papers as a special issue with Dr. Claudia Merli, DAJ's General Editor, and Dr Stephen M. Lyon, Conference Advisor and DAJ's former General Editor, they happily agreed. They also encouraged the participants to publish their researches, and answered their queries about how to publish journals during a session at the conference dedicated on publishing in anthropology. This special issue, as the first episode of this conference publication, offers six papers. Although there is no common focus of these papers just as there was not any at the conference, these involve the topics related to ethics, health, gender, identity, vulnerabilities, and human rights. There is, however, a common thread of policy-oriented research along most of these papers. I will now briefly introduce these papers to highlight the main topics these are dealing with.

In her paper, Rachel Douglas-Jones shows concerns about, what she refers to as, the international regime of biomedical research. Through the analogy of a broken thread in a finely woven silk cloth, she examines the threats and perceptions involved in working of ethics review committees in Asia. She presents an example of the NGO that works to build the capacity of research ethics committees in the Asian region. Her paper also analyses the discussions at and after a conference on ethics in health research, and suggests how the perceived “gaps” are related to the notion of “trust” (Jiménez 2011).

Anthropological research on HIV/AIDS initially dealt with the behavioural aspects in transmission of the disease. Contemporarily, anthropology is engaged in social inequalities and political economy linked with HIV/AIDS (Parker 2001; Chaudhary 2010). In the second paper, Caitlin O’Grady describes the stories and experiences of HIV-positive women in North London. She discusses the exclusion of women from designated “at-risk” groups within the policy decisions and public awareness campaigns due to the stigma and discrimination attached to HIV. The paper treats such issues in a broader anthropological and philosophical discourse involving the structural violence, and modern social imagery (Farmer 2004; Foucault 1990; Gramsci 1970). By analysing this gendered dimension of the policies for HIV, the author is in favour of shifting the policy on “at risk groups” to a general focus on risk behaviour.

Different communities all over the world have different attitudes towards social change depending upon their cultural sensitivities, local and international political dynamics, and mechanism of the change being taken place (Inglehart, and Baker 2000; Mughal 2008). Anthropology of South Asia has peculiar approaches to power and conflict over the ownership of land in rural and tribal societies (Lyon 2004; Aufschnaiter 2009). The third paper in this issue is penned by Amy Hannington. This paper offers an analysis of change and resistance in Orissa, India. The study presents the Dongria Kond-Vedanta struggle over the mining of the bauxite rich tops of the Niyamgiri range. Hannington shows how the Dongria Kond beliefs and practices helped gaining the attention of international media, NGOs and ecologists to an endangered sacred mountain.

Shuhua Chen explains in her paper the practices of home making on move by the Chinese migrant labourers focusing on the Southeast Asian Emigration from 1860 to 1949. She asserts that the migrant population's ways of constructing homes during their journeys are influenced by the nostalgia associated with the past. She uses the family remittance letters written by these migrant labourers to their families back home for analysing the home making practices. This paper shows the emotional association of migrants with their homes and discusses the concept of home, identity, and migration through a methodological innovation. In this regard, it contributes to anthropology of space - the space that is entrenched in home, migration, border, identity, and body (Cieraad 1999; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003; Abid 2009).

Bowen Wei's paper discusses the issues related to homosexuals in sports communities. While presenting the example of a Rugby club in Edinburgh, he explains how Rugby is associated with the notions of manhood, masculinity, male domination and power. The paper explains the stigma attached to homosexual behaviour, which curtails the socialisation of gays in the local community. He argues that the Rugby gay players want to "re-merge" with the local community at an 'equal' status. Analysing the issues related to human rights is an important framework through which anthropology deals with the policy (Messer 1993). There are different problems and issues in human societies, which are dealt under the umbrella term of human rights. These include, but not limited to, crimes, gender violence, child labour, corruption, reproductive rights, minority rights, and racism. In her research note, Fiona Hukula presents a different dimension of gender violence in Papua New Guinea by analysing every day talk to describe the ways in which people labelled the behaviours of being male and female. Criticising the approach of human rights NGOs on gender and violence, she is in dialogue with a general understanding towards this issue, which involves the ideas of male dominance, modernity and power relations in the cultural context. She attempts to suggest alternative views on the issue of gender and violence through the framework of relationality.

I am hopeful that the readers will find all the papers informative, engaging, and innovative in their approaches and treatments of the issues they are dealing with.

Acknowledgements

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